YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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MUSSAR FOR MODERNS

by Rav Elyakim Krumbein

Sicha #4: Anava, Part 1 - The Humility Dilemma

Our tradition places great emphasis on humility as an ethical ideal. This often confronts the serious student with a dilemma, whose resolution is of critical importance.

The dilemma issues from the apparently paradoxical role played by anava - humility - in the general field of spiritual activity. On the one hand, anava occupies a special place among the various character traits extolled in Mussar literature. Anyone familiar with our sources knows that anava is regarded as one of the most important, if not THE most important of desirable midot, and that its opposite - gaava (pride) - is seen as particularly pernicious, even revolting. The Rambam, for example, recommends in Hilkhot De'ot that we follow the "middle way" with respect to personal characteristics. And yet, he writes (chap. 2, paragraph 3):

However, there are some traits with regard to which one may not conduct himself intermediately, but rather should distance himself from one extreme and adopt the opposite extreme. Specifically, this is true regarding haughtiness; for it is not good for a person to be merely meek, but rather he should be humble of spirit, and his spirit should be exceedingly low. For this reason Scripture calls Moshe Rabbenu "very humble," not merely "humble." Therefore the Sages commanded: "Be very, very lowly of spirit." They also said that he who raises his heart is denying God, as it is written, "Lest your heart become high, and you forget the Lord your God." And they also said: "The ban should be placed on anyone who has even a little arrogance."

What is the reason for this special emphasis? For our purposes, I would single out the relevance of this particular midda (character trait) to our general area of study. The whole idea of working to achieve tikkun repair is based on the premise that at present, all is not right with oneself. To the extent that a person remains unmindful of his shortcomings, he does not believe that he really needs to correct anything. Arrogance, then, is the nemesis of Mussar. The thought that "I am basically fine, but anyone can stand a little improvement" will not generate the will-power to make major changes. A powerful drive for spiritual progress can grow only from the soil of humility.

Paradoxically, however, humility itself may often be counted among the impediments to religious growth. Frequently, anava is used to justify a state of torpor, an attitude of laziness and despair inimical to any sort of meaningful activity, including Mussar. One who has succumbed to this phenomenon is certain that his attitude is the praiseworthy outcome of his "humility." I would like to illustrate how this can happen using a passage by a modern-day author, Rav Yisrael Hess o.b.m., who wrote a popularly-oriented Mussar book called Derekh Ha-Avoda. Prior to the following citation, the author had been leading the reader in a search for the "I":

Who, then, am "I?" Not my body, my mind, my other spiritual capacities, not even my will. We've searched for the "I," but we haven't found it. Perhaps, then, there is no "I?"

Wonderful - congratulations! At long last we discover: there is no "Ani" (= I), but there is "Ayin" (= nothing). This actual "nothing," while descending from the world of absolute truth into this world of falsehood and confusion, became so distorted and confused that the order of the letters of the word which designates our essence, "ayin," became distorted and disordered into the lie: that there is an "ani" ("I")...

This requires explanation. We know from the Prophets that the glory of God fills the world... If the existence of God is present in all the worlds and fills them, then "there is no place vacant of Him" and it follows that there can be no existence other than Him in the world. Any reality which takes up place in the world, of necessity pushes away the Holy One, who until now occupied that place. Of course, we are not talking about, God forbid, a physical reality, as though Divinity were to occupy physical space in the world and that the space which occupies, say, a stone, pushes God away. We are, of course, talking about a FEELING. Any created thing should feel itself as being totally null vis-a-vis its Creator. Anything that feels itself as an independent entity, existing separately from God and standing autonomously, is demonstrating (by this very feeling of existence which does not nullify itself before God) that there is, so to speak, another entity in the world besides God, and it is this which is tantamount to pushing away the Divine Presence. On the other hand, any created thing which, granted, physically exists and occupies physical space in the world, but which does not feel itself as an entity, which nullifies its existence before God and is not autonomous and independent, that creature is void and does not take up the place of its Creator...

Further on, the author applies this approach to the definition of "evil":

...It follows that the evil in the world results only from the lack of self-nullification before God, and is to be found only in one who feels and acts as an independent entity which exists unto itself. Whoever utilizes his free choice and actualizes the option given him at the moment of his creation to sense himself as a separate entity, he is the doer of evil. Hence, when we say that "God created evil," we are saying that God created man with the option of seeing himself as a separate entity... This feeling of existence is what we have called "I," the sense that there is an "I" which is not null. Hence, God created evil = God created me with the feeling of "I;" in other words, "I" = evil.

This presentation appears to be following the theory of anava to its inexorable conclusion. God is everything, and therefore I am truly nothing. One who assimilates this viewpoint is, ostensibly, virtually inoculated against arrogance. But many well-meaning people react to this argument with protest.

I don't know what Rav Hess's approach "does" to you, but I know that many feel that it attacks their religiosity. In candor, I understand them very well. Jews have many commandments to perform. In fact, the essence of being Jewish - perhaps the essence of being human, in the Jewish view - is being commanded. The tasks which God expects us to perform are at times exceedingly difficult. Can a "nothing" be commanded? Can a nullity be expected to exercise self-control in trying situations, or toil mightily in Torah study or altruistic endeavors? Doesn't success in Torah imply, and require, not nothingness, but greatness?[1] Extolling the virtues of self-nullification seems to entail the danger of passivity, and tends to excuse man's low spiritual achievement as a necessary result of his lack of inherent value.

But then what? If we can't live with the idea of "self-nullification," do we dismiss humility as a desired goal? Clearly, abandoning the idea of anava altogether is not an option. The centrality of this issue is such that anyone interested in Mussar must formulate for himself a clear and workable approach.

We will not examine here the question of whether Rav Hess's argument can be found in the sources, and to what extent the sources justify his conclusion in the realm of practical ethics. I would rather try to develop an alternative definition of humility, different from the foregoing, and not based on its philosophic premise. On this occasion I will stray from my usual eclectic attitude, and take a clear stand.

I believe that the author of the Mussar classic, Chovot Ha-levavot (Sha'ar Ha-kenia, 9), alludes to a different conception of humility in the following passage, in which he deals with pride based on spiritual achievement:

Pride over spiritual attainments can be of two types, one disgraceful and the other - praiseworthy. It is disgraceful if a person is proud of his wisdom or the righteous man of his deeds, if this makes whatever he already has of them to be much in his eyes, and makes him think that the good name and high opinion which he has among men is enough for him, and makes him belittle and despise others and speak ill of them, and causes the wise and great of his generation to be unworthy in his eyes, and causes him to gloat over the faults and folly of his comrades. This is what our Sages of blessed memory called, "honoring oneself through the disgrace of one's fellow-man." A person such as we have described is neither meek nor humble.

But the praiseworthy type, is when a person is proud of his wisdom or the righteous man of his deeds, and considers them a great favor of the Creator for which to be thankful and joyous, and this causes him to try to add on to them, to be humble with his near ones and enjoy his friends, and to be considerate of their honor, to conceal their folly and to speak their praise... and all his good deeds are few in his eyes, and he constantly works to increase them, and is humble because of his inability to do as much as he would like... This pride does no harm to humility and does not keep it distant. Of this pride Scripture says in connection with Yehoshafat, "His heart was high in the ways of God." This pride assists Humility, and adds to it, as it is written, "humility brings about fear of God."

The discussion in Chovot Ha-levavot is based on a very instructive premise: that not all pride is bad. We are not yet able to understand all of what he tells us, but he clearly thinks that there are two ways of being proud: one of them is antithetical to humility, and the other, not only does not conflict with humility, but actually assists and strengthens it. Rav Kook, in a collection of brief ethical remarks called Midot ha-Re'iya, made the same observation (Gaava, paragraph 25):

He who would penetrate the profound hidden reaches of his soul must carefully assess the feeling of pride: which is that illegitimate feeling which can cause him to behave against his own better judgment as well as that of his Maker, and which is the refined feeling, which enlarges the human spirit and reminds man of his full, glorious, spiritual essence?

If we only knew how to make the distinction!

I think we can be helped here by once again enlisting the aid of Rav Kook (ibid. Kavod, 4):

To the extent of the lack of inner perfection, nature will strive for exterior perfection. Only from a state of baseness of spirit will awaken the drive for self-glorification before others, whether in what the spirit really has or in what it doesn't have. Therefore, man must increase the impression of the inner perfection, and then his words when speaking of himself before others will always be properly balanced.

Rav Kook defines the motive for self-glorification. It is not, as one might think, the result of a positive self-appraisal which, not content with its own opinion, demands the agreement and recognition of others. The deeper root of the need for honor is a paucity of spirit, which Rav Kook tellingly describes as the lack of "the IMPRESSION of inner perfection." If I understand him correctly, Rav Kook is saying that the psychological basis of arrogance is LACK OF SELF-ESTEEM. For only one who is unconvinced as to his inherent worth will feel the need to find artificial compensation in approval from without - what Rav Kook terms "exterior perfection."

This is not to say that false pride will necessarily result in addiction to praise from others. There are subtler expressions. A good friend once told me, "Do you know what gaava is? It's when you're in a room full of acquaintances, and you go through them in your mind, saying to yourself: I'm smarter than this one, I'm a better friend than that one, I'm more industrious than the next, etc." It doesn't matter if the caress comes from others or from myself - the addictive pre-occupation is the same. This is the "gaava giveaway." Gaava is the compulsive quest for honor.

The antithesis of gaava is not the "humility" which says, "I am truly nothing." On the contrary: it is true, liberating self-esteem; this is the "praiseworthy pride" of the Chovot Ha-levavot. A Jew, in particular, knows that the Master of the Universe has great expectations of him. How could such weighty, spiritual demands be made of anyone other than a being with a Divine soul, with the profound potential for a lifetime of moral feeling and activity, a being of the utmost significance? If I truly believe what I profess to believe, I don't need anyone's approval. Compliments and recognition are irrelevant. The inner richness of one's personality is more than sufficient; the only concern is - am I doing enough? Am I fulfilling my destiny?

This last sentence brings us to the question which I am sure you wanted to ask. If the antithesis of gaava is self-esteem - what is humility? Why are we supposed to be "very, very lowly of spirit"? The answer is that if we are convinced of the greatness of our Divine-human soul to the "point of no concern" with its verification, we will necessarily be confronted with the stark reality: our lives until now have not remotely approached the level which such a soul could attain.

Remember what the Chovot Ha-levavot said? The negative pride results in one's thinking that the wisdom and good deeds that one has already attained "are much in his eyes." Where does this thought come from? From lack of self-esteem; from the conviction that I am really incapable of doing much that is worthwhile, and if I have managed to get anywhere, I truly deserve approbation, because it was above and beyond what could be reasonably expected from someone like me. At any rate, the idea of further achievement would be absurd and out of character.

On the other hand, positive pride actually ASSISTS humility. This is because positive pride comes from self-esteem. No matter how much I have done that is worthwhile, it will never be enough, because I know myself well enough to realize that I could have done much more. Thus is genuine humility inspired - the thought that "all his good deeds are few in his eyes." Positive attainments are considered not, mainly, as confirmation of one's worth (for this is scarcely necessary), but as confirmation of what can and remains to be done.

To sum up: Humility (Anava) = self-esteem; Arrogance (Gaava) = lack of self-esteem. If you remember, we opened this shiur by posing the "humility dilemma:" how to arrive at a definition of humility which will encourage tikkun, rather than stunt it. We conclude, after having offered our definition of anava, with a different "humility dilemma" - the psychological fault-line of intrinsic self-worth on the one hand, versus the sense of inadequate fulfillment on the other. The two poles are logically interdependent, though they are bound to conflict experientially, even as they fortify each other. This is a healthy conflict. It is, perhaps, the fundamental conflict of religious man.

I think enough has been said about this for one sitting. In our next shiur, God willing, we will follow up the definition of anava with a discussion of some of its further implications.

FOOTNOTE:

[1] At this point I call attention once more to the problematic aspect of partial quotations. I raised this matter in the footnote to lesson no. 2. In this case, however, I do believe that Rav Hess's position is rather well-represented by the passages quoted here.